

WHAT'S IN A NAME: ISSUES OF RACE, GENDER, CULTURE, AND POWER IN THE NAMING OF PUBLIC SCHOOL BUILDINGS IN KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI, 1940–1995

In virtually all societies, naming is an act steeped in cultural meanings and value considerations. Naming of children is arguably one of the more significant cultural events in a person's life (e.g., Alford, 1988; Van Poppel & Smith, 1999). The naming of public buildings, too, makes a profound statement about what or whom a particular society holds in high regard. To put it simply, buildings are not named for just anyone. On one level, naming a public building after a person is an affirmation of what a society deems to be significant accomplishments or outstanding service, or recognition of someone who is considered to be of historical or cultural importance. Naming a building after a person further implies that the person honored possesses the appropriate qualities necessary to be recognized in such a permanent fashion, and that the individual was, in some respects, the embodiment of the community's shared values.

At a different level, the act of naming is plainly a statement regarding power. In many respects the power to name something or some place is an expression of control or a manifestation of influence over the process of selecting a name. The power to bestow a name on a public place is thereby both an assertion of authority and an affirmation of where that authority resides in a particular community. Thus, the naming of a public building may not necessarily illustrate the shared values of an entire community, but rather at times reflects the narrower interests and values of those individuals who have the greatest influence in the process of selecting the name (Greenblatt, 1991; Stewart, 1958; Stump, 1988).¹

This article will analyze the naming of public school buildings in Kansas City, Missouri between the 1940s and early 1990s, exploring the values which were implicit in the selection of names, as well as the individuals or groups that had the greatest influence in the process of selecting names. Particular attention will be paid to the manner in which the values endorsed through the act of naming shifted over time, and how the individuals and groups that controlled the process changed during this roughly fifty year period. Moreover, developments in Kansas City will be examined from the perspective of Paulo Freire's (1970/1993) critical analysis of language and power relationships inherent in communication and education. Freire proposed that language is a powerful tool which may be used as either an instrument of domination or liberation. As we shall see, initially naming schools was an act of domination, an assertion of power by a very small group of influential individuals—high ranking officials in the school district's central administration and the members of the Board of Education. Over time, however, the process by which school names were selected changed and the locus of power shifted in such a way that the authority to bestow names on schools was shared with the broader community and reflected more accurately the demographic composition and cultural diversity of the city. In essence, to paraphrase Freire, this analysis of school naming

and the power relationships inherent in the process illustrates how communication can be transformed from an abstraction controlled by elites to a new reality in which the larger community may participate in the dialogue, construct meaning, exert influence, and take part in “naming the world” (p. 69).

School Naming Practices in the Late Segregated Period, 1940–1954

In 1940, Kansas City was home to a little more than 400,000 residents, about 10% of whom were African-American (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1942). As the map of the 1940 census indicates (see Appendix, Figure 1), the great majority of Kansas City’s African-American population lived in a large central neighborhood just east of downtown. Other significant pockets of black population were located on the city’s west side and in two small enclaves to the south and southeast. Kansas City’s segregated school system in the 1940s was comprised of more than sixty schools for white students and twelve for African-Americans, and in Kansas City there was clearly a racially specific quality to the naming of schools (Kansas City Missouri School District [KCMSD], 1941). While white students attended schools named for notable figures across a broad sweep of American history and culture, black students attended schools with names that clearly designated that the school was for use by African-American students. Among those honored by having a segregated black school in Kansas City named for them were: four prominent abolitionists, Charles Sumner, William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, and Wendell Phillips; two great black poets, Phyllis Wheatley and Paul Dunbar; Crispus Attucks, a free black man killed in the Boston Massacre of 1770; Blanche Bruce, the first African-American elected to the United States Congress; three long-time teachers and administrators in Kansas City’s segregated black schools; and, of course, as was true for a number of cities, the segregated black high school was named for the Great Emancipator, President Abraham Lincoln (KCMSD, 1989a).

In 1940, these twelve schools were sufficient for serving Kansas City’s African-American school age population. However, during the 1940s, the city’s black population grew by about 33% (Bureau of the Census, 1950). Most of the growth occurred in the large central residential area, and crowding in the segregated black schools serving this area became acute. At the same time, enrollments declined dramatically in the white schools located on the fringes of the expanding black neighborhood as white families moved away. Accordingly, on four occasions during the 1940s and early 1950s, school officials in Kansas City converted schools from white use to use by African-American students. Interestingly, on each occasion, the school board also made the symbolic final gesture of changing the school’s name when the enrollment switched from white to black. Thus, when African-American students entered the former Washington Irving School in 1942, the building had been renamed Booker T. Washington Elementary School (KCMSD, 1942, 1989a; “Turn Irving Over,” 1942). The same was true two years later when black youngsters entered another newly converted school. What had been Alexander Hamilton School the previous year was renamed George Washington Carver when it became a segregated black school in 1945 (KCMSD, 1945, 1989a). Two years later, Thomas Jefferson

School was renamed Benjamin Banneker Elementary when it opened its doors to African-American students (KCMSD, 1947, 1989a). Finally, in 1953 when Thomas Hart Benton Elementary was converted to black use, its name was changed to D. A. Holmes, in honor of a long-time pastor at Kansas City's Paseo Baptist Church and one of the leaders of the early civil rights movement in the city during the 1930s (KCMSD, 1953a, 1989a). Apparently, it was of some consequence to school officials that African-American children attend schools whose names were racially identifiable.

The naming practices in the segregated school system, and name changes in the 1940s and early 1950s, shed substantial light on the racial perspective of those individuals who controlled the process of selecting names. Essentially, the authority to adopt names for schools in Kansas City was the exclusive province of the Board of Education, and through the 1940s and 1950s, the school board was comprised entirely of upper class whites from the affluent southwestern section of the city far removed from the black neighborhoods (KCMSD, 1989b). The names chosen by the school board were consistent with the upper class white leadership's notions of appropriate role models for young black students, and clearly reflected their ideological preferences concerning what sort of qualities and achievements were worthy of recognition. A great scientist, an astronomer and surveyor, the founder of an institution of higher learning for African-Americans, and a local black clergyman—these were appropriate role models, these were individuals who conveyed notions of what African-American youngsters might aspire to in their lives. The participation of anyone outside of the Board of Education in the naming process was never solicited and, on those occasions when it was offered, exerted little influence with school board members. Such was the case in 1953 when a group of African-American parents requested that the name of Benton School not be changed when it was converted to use by black students because it caused confusion as to which school their children were assigned. After hearing the parents' appeal, the Board of Education renamed the school D. A. Holmes (KCMSD, 1953b). Clearly, the balance of power in the communication between the school board and the district's patrons remained firmly on the side of the board members. The communication, as indicated by the school board's action in renaming the school over the objections of parents in the neighborhood, was one-sided and excluded other participants. In the context of Freire's analysis, the authority to name schools remained an act of domination dictated by elites with little consideration of the perspectives that existed outside of the Board of Education's small circle. Plainly, the school board indicated that it alone controlled the naming process and it continued to do so for some time to come.

School Naming Practices, 1955–1969

In 1955, one year after the Supreme Court's monumental *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, the Kansas City public schools desegregated. Desegregation brought an end to the necessity of renaming school buildings when they were converted from white to black use. Desegregation did not, however, bring an end to the school district's predilection for a certain sort of symmetry in the naming of schools. School board members preferred to

name schools for individuals whose ethnicity corresponded to the predominant race of the students attending the school. In the early 1960s, Kansas City opened two new schools. Both were located in neighborhoods which were exclusively white, and both were named for outstanding members of the white community. Melcher Elementary was named for a former superintendent, while a new junior high school honored Clifford Nowlin, a poet and former teacher in the Kansas City schools (Horsley, 1997; KCMSD, 1989a). Once again, the school board made its choices without soliciting the input of anyone outside its circle.

By the late 1960s, the school board began to depart from its unwritten policy of choosing school names that reflected the racial composition of the students whom the school served. Four new schools were opened in the late 1960s, all of which were built to accommodate the rising enrollments in the rapidly expanding African-American residential area. As the 1970 census map illustrates (see Appendix, Figure 2), the large central African-American neighborhood continued to expand to the southeast throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Based on demographic surveys for the neighborhoods that the new buildings were to serve, it was clear to school officials that each of the four new schools would be predominantly black. Two of the schools were accordingly named for prominent African-Americans. A new junior high honored Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., while one of the new elementary schools was named for Chester A. Franklin, the founder of the city's African-American newspaper, *The Kansas City Call* (Horsley, 1997; KCMSD, 1989a).

The other two elementary schools did not conform to the old naming practice. Made aware of the fact that in the history of the district just two schools had been named for women, the school board opted to recognize two female Kansas Citians. Although both schools opened with enrollments that were more than 95% black, both schools were named for whites. Mary Harmon Weeks, a local educator, author, and founder of the Kansas City parent-teacher association was honored at one building, while the other was named for Dr. Katherine Richardson, a local physician and the founder of Kansas City's Children's Mercy Hospital (Horsley, 1997; KCMSD, 1989a; O'Connor, 1991a).

Choosing to name these two schools after white women probably says less about the school board's predisposition toward racial symmetry than it does about the curious paucity of schools named for women. Moreover, the decision to honor two women in the late 1960s also reflects a subtle shift in the school board's power structure. Although women periodically had held seats on the Board of Education, the vast majority of board members throughout the school district's history had been men. Prior to 1950, only a handful of women had won election to positions on the school board, and often the board was exclusively male. However, beginning in the mid-1950s, women consistently occupied two of the board's six seats, and at times held three seats (Travis, 1989). Although women never comprised a majority of the Board of Education during the 1950s and 1960s, they were better represented than had been the case previously. Men continued to dominate the school board and the officer positions on the board, but women were in a position to exert some influence in the process of selecting names for schools.

In part, the decision to honor Mary Harmon Weeks and Katherine Richardson illustrates the recently acquired influence of women on the Board of Education and was indicative of the inclusion of women in the dialogue that mediated the selection of names for schools. As such, the changing dynamics within the school board were a microcosm of change occurring on a larger scale beyond Kansas City. The 1960s marked the beginning of the modern women's movement and signaled a watershed in the nation's political, social, and economic structure. Women's demands extended beyond the push for equal protection of the law and economic opportunities equal to those available to men. The movement also sparked a growing consciousness of the need to insist upon including the experiences of women as an essential part of the nation's history, and to demand recognition for the historical and cultural contributions of women in America. In this light, the school board's decision to honor Weeks and Richardson is both an example of the slowly evolving recognition among school board members that women had made crucial contributions throughout Kansas City's history, as well as a manifestation of women demanding a place in the dialogue on equal terms with men.

It is important to reiterate, however, that although the gender dynamics and composition of the school board had changed, in other respects, there remained a great deal of continuity on the Board of Education. Board members continued to be drawn exclusively from the upper crust of Kansas City society, and the board continued to be comprised entirely of whites from the southwestern section of the city. Moreover, the authority to bestow names on schools and control over the process of selecting names remained the exclusive province of the school board. Input from the public or community groups was never solicited and the names chosen for new schools continued to reflect the preferences of a very select group of upper class whites.

Demographic Change and New Power Relationships, 1970–1985

Although the school board throughout the 1960s remained a very exclusive body largely insulated from the influence of other members of the community, a shift was coming. In part, the changing demographics of the city foreshadowed the direction in which the school district would move. Between 1950 and 1980, the African-American population in Kansas City grew by nearly 70,000 while the white population declined by more than 150,000. Whereas African-Americans accounted for about 12% of the population in 1950, by 1980 one in three residents of the city was black (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1952, 1962, 1972, 1983). Furthermore, as the map illustrates (see Appendix, Figure 3), by 1990 the predominantly black residential corridor extended more than ten miles from the old central neighborhood east of downtown to the southeastern limits of the city (Bureau of the Census, 1993). Moreover, the racial composition of the public school enrollment reversed completely during the same period. While white students had comprised about 80% of the public school enrollment in the early 1950s, non-whites became a majority of the enrollment in 1970, and by 1985, non-whites accounted for about 75% of the students in the Kansas City public schools (KCMSD, 1985).

In light of the city's changing demographics, and in response to increased pressure from local civil rights groups, African-Americans gained significantly more influence in school district affairs during the late 1960s and early 1970s. One indicator of the rising influence of African-Americans was the substantial growth in the number of blacks holding administrative positions. Prior to the 1960s, only a handful of blacks held positions in the district's central administration. However, mounting pressure from the local NAACP reversed this situation in the late 1960s. Threats of litigation and two investigations launched by the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare persuaded school officials in Kansas City to restructure the administration and place dozens of qualified African-Americans in administrative positions (Borthwick & Keeler, 1981). Moreover, the gross underrepresentation—indeed the complete absence—of any people of color on the district's Board of Education was remedied in 1970. Again under pressure from civil rights organizations, the school district made far-reaching changes in the composition of the school board. Whereas, previously all six seats on the Board of Education were determined by city-wide elections, the 1970 redistricting plan divided the city into six geographic sub-districts, each of which elected one school board member. Three additional at-large seats were determined through city-wide elections (Travis, 1989). The redistricting plan ensured that a minimum of two, and more likely three or four school board members, would be African-American. Moreover, the redistricting plan provided the Latino community with a much better opportunity to gain representation on the Board of Education. Indeed, redistricting produced the desired result. Each year since 1970, the Kansas City school board has had at least two African-American members (Travis, 1989). In 2002, four African-Americans, a Latino, and four whites sat on the city's Board of Education (KCMSD, 2002). The shifting composition of the school board and central administration since the late 1960s brought significant change to the district in innumerable respects, and in no small way influenced the process of selecting names for new schools.

School Naming Practices, 1985–1995

Owing to rather extraordinary fiscal difficulties stemming from the failure of nineteen consecutive building bond issues and tax levy increases, as well as declining enrollments, Kansas City opened no new public schools between 1969 and mid-1980s (Travis, 1989). However, a period of furious school construction was initiated in the late 1980s as one component of a desegregation plan ordered by the federal district court (*Jenkins v. Missouri*, 1987). The new desegregation plan itself was in some respects an indication of the recently acquired clout of the African-American and Latino communities in school district affairs. Many of the details of the desegregation plan were hammered out in consultation with various black and Hispanic neighborhood and civic organizations. Developed with the express intent of making the Kansas City schools comparable to those of surrounding suburban communities, the school construction plan called for massive renovations or new construction for every school in the district (Hunter, 1987). Over the course of the next decade, more than two dozen new schools were complet-

ed in Kansas City. Many of these new facilities retained the names of the former schools that they replaced. For several, however, the school district selected new names, and the process by which those names were determined was radically different from the previous system in which members of the school board acted alone.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the input of community members was actively sought in choosing appropriate names for the district's new schools. Public meetings were conducted to solicit suggestions from community members, and interracial committees were formed to evaluate and debate the merits of the individuals nominated for recognition (O'Connor, 1991a). Although the school board retained the ultimate authority to name new schools, the board clearly demonstrated a newly acquired sensitivity to the values and interests of the various neighborhoods served by those schools. Indeed, the school board consistently deferred to the choices made through the public forums and community meetings. The school board's approval of the names selected at the community level resulted in some fascinating choices, at least a few of which would have been highly unlikely under the system in place previously.

In 1993, the consensus of the Latino community on the city's west side was that the new foreign language magnet school in their neighborhood should be named in honor of Primitivo Garcia. It was a selection that would have been inconceivable under the former system. Garcia was a native of Mexico living as a resident alien in Kansas City when he was murdered in 1967 at the age of twenty-three. What made Garcia a hero on the west side was that he was killed when he intervened to protect a pregnant teacher who was being robbed by youth gang members. The teacher whose life he saved had been working with Garcia helping him to study for his naturalization exam. In this context, it is clear to see why residents of the west side sought to have Garcia recognized. He was a good citizen, interested in gaining his citizenship and entering more fully into American life, and he appreciated the benefits of education. Garcia was a perfectly logical choice, but not one the school board likely would have made on their own (Horsley, 1993; Sanchez, 1993).

In the African-American neighborhoods in the southern part of the city, several new schools were completed in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and at least three of the names chosen for those schools merit some analysis. One of the new elementary schools was named in honor of Harold Holliday, the city's leading civil rights attorney during the 1950s and 1960s who later served as a representative in the state legislature. A few decades earlier the school district would not possibly have considered Holliday for such recognition. He, more than any other individual, had been a thorn in the side of the school district. On numerous occasions, Holliday led legal campaigns against the school district seeking to improve the condition of African-American students in the public schools. For this he was properly held in high esteem by the city's blacks, and by the 1990s African-Americans had sufficient influence in the naming process to see that Holliday was recognized by the school district (Horsley, 1997; O'Connor, 1991a).

Another of the new schools in the southern section of the city was named in honor of Leroy "Satchel" Paige, a stellar pitcher in the Negro

Leagues who is enshrined in the Baseball Hall of Fame. In an earlier time, Paige would have been a most unusual choice for a school's name. At some level it seems rather ironic to name a school after a man who never attended school for any significant amount of time and who had very little formal education. However, in other respects honoring Paige was most appropriate. The new school was a Greek classical magnet which emphasized the development of mind and body. Thus, honoring an outstanding athlete made sense, and Satchel Paige was one of the cultural icons of black Kansas City during the 1940s and '50s when he starred on the Kansas City Monarchs baseball team. The school board approved of the committee's decision and in 1991, the school opened with six of Paige's former teammates from the Negro Leagues attending the dedication (Horsley, 1997; O'Connor, 1991b).

One final example of the shifting of values that had occurred by the early 1990s is illustrated in naming the new fine arts middle school for Paul Robeson. Despite his remarkable talent and many accomplishments as an actor and singer, Robeson would not have been considered by earlier school boards. During the red scare of the 1950s and 1960s, Robeson's reputation was badly tarnished by allegations that he was sympathetic to communism. He sought refuge abroad for a period of five years and considered renouncing his American citizenship. By the 1990s, the members of the neighborhood selection committee considered those allegations trivial, a by-product of the hysteria that characterized the Cold War period. The Board of Education agreed and endorsed the committee's recommendation to name the middle school for Robeson (Horsley, 1997).

In comparison to their counterparts a couple of decades earlier, the school boards of the late 1980s and early 1990s clearly had a much different perspective on the method by which names were chosen for schools. The process in place by the 1980s recognized that a school was an important institution in a neighborhood and that the community members living in the surrounding area should have some influence regarding the selection of a name. Moreover, the process underscored that ideally the name should come from the community and honor an individual whom the members of that community considered to be worthy of recognition. This was a radical shift from the previous system in which names were decided upon by an extremely small group of individuals who had virtually no ties to many of the neighborhoods where schools were located and had no interest in soliciting recommendations from the community. Furthermore, the names which emerged out of the public forums, community meetings, and selection committees reflected an important cultural shift. The school names adopted in the late 1980s and early 1990s were unlike those of previous years. A few decades earlier, school names reflected the perceptions of what the white elites who dominated the school board considered to be worthy individuals and appropriate role models. By the 1980s, this was no longer the case. The prospective names for new schools which were discussed and endorsed at the neighborhood level were those that were meaningful to the local residents and reflected their interests and values.

Conclusions

Kansas City's experience is informative for the manner in which the process of selecting school names changed over time in directions that recognized and valued the diversity of the population. As the school district's demographic base shifted dramatically between the 1960s and the 1990s, the power structure in Kansas City evolved in ways that acknowledged the changing composition of the school district and its patron groups. In some instances these changes were dramatic, such as the adoption of the sub-district format for school board elections in order to produce a more diverse and representative policy making body. At other times, change was much more subtle, such as in empowering community forums to select names for the district's new schools. In both cases, the gap between the policy making body and the larger community was bridged to some degree. With respect to the naming of schools, it is significant to note that, in each instance, the Board of Education honored the recommendations that emerged out of the community groups and committees. Whereas previously the process of selecting school names had largely alienated and discounted the neighborhood constituencies served by schools, Freire would recognize that the process in place by the late 1980s nurtured dialogue between community groups and school officials. The exclusion and domination previously exercised by a small cadre of elites had been replaced by a more inclusive process that embodied a far greater degree of mutual respect and trust. Moreover, the authoritarian power previously wielded by school officials was supplanted by meaningful dialogue with members of the larger community that reflected the manner in which the gender, racial, and cultural dynamics of the city had changed over time. By the 1980s, the process of selecting names for schools was transformed into a structure that empowered and encouraged all members of the community to participate in the shared experience of "naming the world." In perhaps a small but profoundly important symbolic way, the school district had begun to respond to the different voices of the city, voices that only a short time earlier went unnoticed and unheeded by school officials.

Note

¹ Developments in Watsonville, California, provide a contemporary example of the tension between the preferences of the larger community and those of the narrower body charged with selecting a school name. In August 2002, Watsonville's school board voted in favor of naming the district's newest school Pajaro Valley High School. In doing so the school board rejected the recommendation to name the school in honor of Cesar Chavez, the Latino labor leader who organized California's migrant farm workers in the 1960s. What made the school board's decision particularly onerous is the fact that about 75% of Watsonville's population is Latino and that petitions containing hundreds of signatures had been presented to the board urging the trustees to honor Chavez. The school board voted six to one in favor of Pajaro Valley High School. Robert Garcia, the only Latino member of the school board, cast the lone dissenting vote (Davis, 2002).

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Appendix

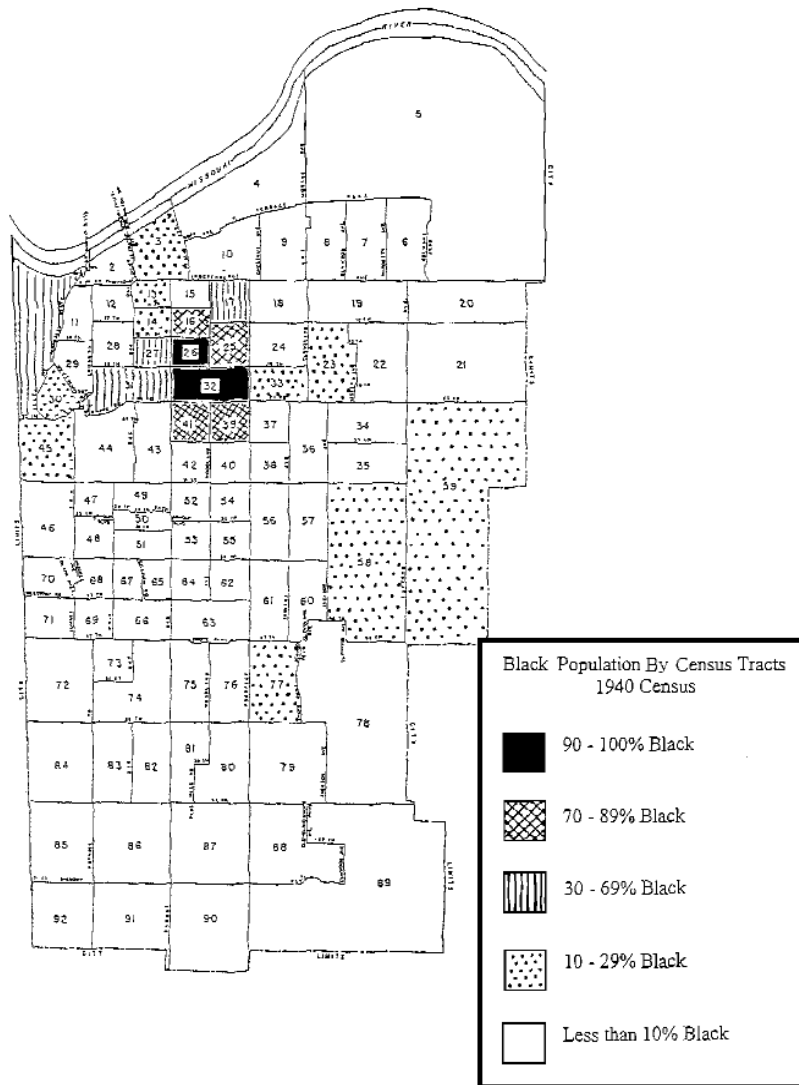


Figure 1. U.S. Bureau of the Census, Census Tracts, Kansas City, MO, 1942.

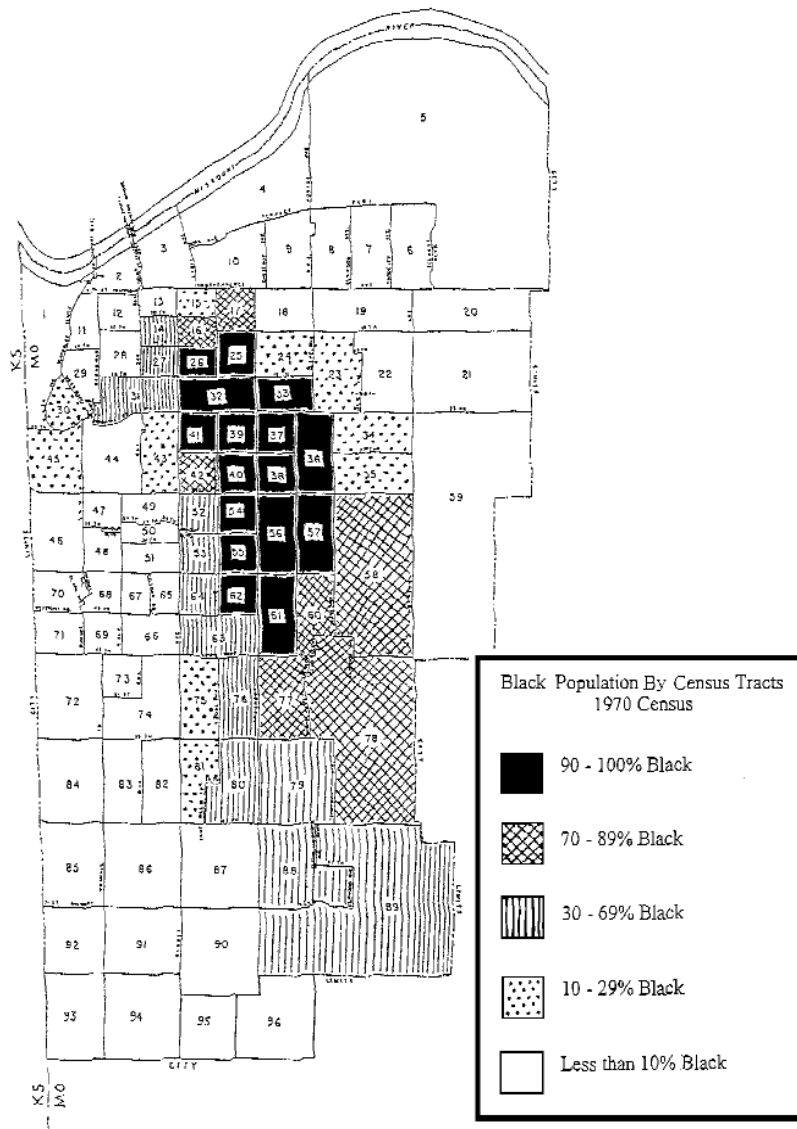


Figure 2. U.S. Bureau of the Census, Census Tracts, Kansas City, MO, 1970.

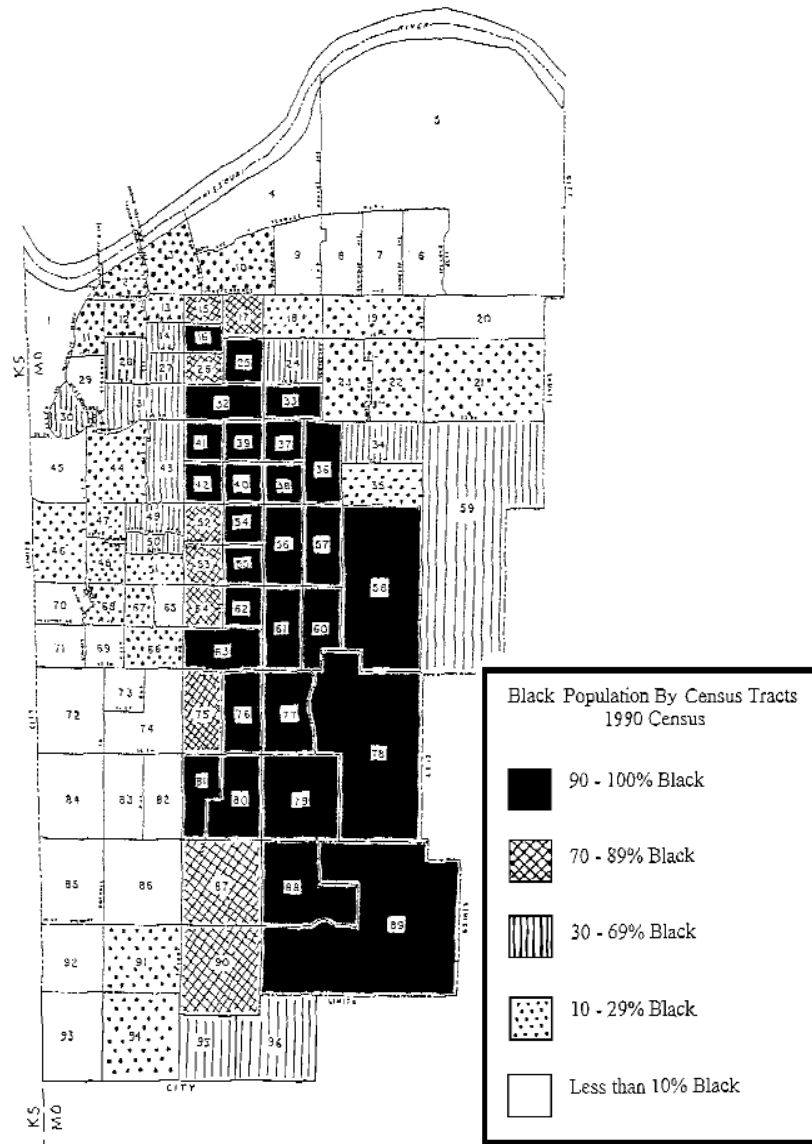


Figure 3. U.S. Bureau of the Census, Census Tracts, Kansas City, MO, 1990.